

Strategic Policy and Resources Committee

Friday, 18th April, 2008

MEETING OF STRATEGIC POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor D. Dodds (Chairman); and
Councillors Adamson, M. Browne, W. Browne, Convery,
Crozier, Hanna, Hartley, Lavery, Long, Maginness,
P. Maskey, McCann, Newton, Rodway and Stoker.

In attendance: Mr. P. McNaney, Chief Executive;
Mr. G. Millar, Director of Improvement;
Mr. C. Quigley, Director of Legal Services;
Mr. T. Salmon, Director of Corporate Services;
Mr. L. Steele, Head of Committee and Members'
Services; and
Mr. J. Hanna, Senior Committee Administrator.

Apology

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillors D. Browne and Smyth.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 14th March were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 1st April.

Modernisation and Improvement

Review of Public Administration - Update

The Committee considered the undernoted report which provided an update in relation to the Review of Public Administration:

“1.0 Relevant Background Information

- 1.1 On 31st March, 2008 the Environment Minister made a statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly on the RPA and the future shape of Local Government within Northern Ireland.**

2.0 Key Issues

2.1 New Councils

In the Ministers' speech she stated that the current 26 Councils will be rationalised to create 11 new Council areas and will be based on the 11b model put forward as part of the original RPA proposals. This would result in a reconfiguration and grouping of Councils on the following basis:

- Belfast CC
- North Down BC and Ards BC
- Down DC and Newry & Mourne DC
- Craigavon BC, Armagh C&DC and Banbridge DC
- Lisburn CC and Castlereagh BC
- Antrim BC and Newtownabbey BC
- Ballymena BC, Larne BC and Carrickfergus BC
- Moyle DC, Ballymoney BC, Coleraine BC, Limavady BC
- Magherafelt DC, Cookstown DC, Dungannon & South Tyrone BC
- Omagh DC and Fermanagh DC
- Derry CC and Strabane DC

2.2 Functions and Budget

In terms of new functions transferring to Local Government, the Minister has stated that the following range of functions will transfer: -

- planning - local development plan functions; development control; and enforcement
- local roads public realm – streetscaping; town and city centre environmental improvements; grass cutting and weed spraying; gully emptying; street lighting; off-street parking; pedestrian permits; maintenance of amenity areas; alley-gating; permitting local events to be held on roads; and salting of footways; enhanced accountability framework within which the Roads Service relationship with local government will operate
- urban regeneration and community development – physical development; area-based regeneration; some community development programmes; and support for the voluntary and community sectors
- housing – registration of houses in multiple occupation; housing unfitness responsibilities including repair and demolition notices; energy conservation at a local level; and travellers' transit sites

- **economic development – Start a Business Programme and Enterprise Shows; Youth Entrepreneurship; Social Entrepreneurship Programme; Investing in Women; and Neighbourhood Renewal funding relating to enterprise initiatives**
- **tourism – small scale tourism accommodation development; local tourism marketing and product development; visitor servicing; providing business support; and providing advice to developers on tourism policies**
- **others – local arts, sports and leisure; EU Rural Development Programme; Spot Listing of buildings; local listing of buildings of architectural/historic interest; Armagh County Museum; local water recreational facilities; local sports; functions of the NI Museum Council; local arts; local festivals; and Donaghadee Harbour**

The scale of those functions that will transfer to Local Government currently accounts for an annual expenditure of some £116 million and involves some 1,070 staff. It constitutes a 25% increase in the budget of Local Government and an increase of almost 12% of staff.

2.3 Community Planning

- 2.3.1 The Minister has stated that a new statute-based community planning process would be introduced and lead by Councils and will be supported with a statutory power of well being. This power of well being will allow Councils to take any action, not already the responsibility of another agency, linked with the community plan that will improve the well being of the local community.**
- 2.3.2 The statement notes that community planning and the power of well being will help with the Minister’s aim ‘to put community leadership at the heart of every Council, and in the hands of every Councillor, bringing together public agencies and key stakeholders to act in partnership to secure excellent and efficient services and address local problems’.**
- 2.3.3 It is the Minister’s intention, in taking forward the RPA reform package, to place a clear statutory requirement upon other public bodies (including policing, health and education bodies) to participate and support the community planning process and a clear duty placed on Councils to engage with local communities in producing a community plan.**

2.4 Reconfigured Local Government Boundaries

2.4.1 A Local Government (Boundaries) Bill will be introduced, by way of accelerated passage, to enable the appointment of an independent Local Government Boundaries Commissioner to draw up the proposed boundaries for the new Local Government Districts.

2.5 Number of Councillors

2.5.1 Under the new arrangements, Belfast will have an upper limit of around 60 Councillors. The remaining Councils will have an upper limit of around 40 Councillors. The precise numbers of Councillors for each new local government district will be informed by the report from the independent Local Government Boundaries Commissioner.

2.6 Severance Arrangements

2.6.1 A severance scheme will also be introduced, possibly as a rolling programme from 2008, in recognition of the contribution of long serving Councillors who opt not to stand for re-election and to facilitate the modernisation and renewal of local government.

2.6.2 Members will accept that this could potentially have significant implications on the political capacity within the Local Government sector with long-term, experienced Councillors deciding to stand down.

2.7 Public Representation

2.6.1 Arrangements will also be developed whereby local government will have a formal input to the decisions in relation to a number of responsibilities that are remaining with central government. Specifically Local Government will have formal liaison arrangements with Roads Service.

2.8 Ongoing Progress

2.8.1 The Minister has indicated that this is the first step in the reform process and that the Executive will review the family of functions to be delivered by local government 12 months after the new Councils become operational and periodically thereafter.

2.9 Functional and Transitional Implementation Arrangements

2.9.1 The Minister is seeking significant support from Ministerial colleagues to enable the NI Executive to meet the tight delivery deadlines for the RPA reform process. Specifically, she will be seeking a funding package for a Local Government Modernisation Challenge Fund to support implementation.

2.9.2 It is intended that the RPA and Local Government modernisation implementation process will take place under the guidance of the Strategic Leadership Board, a renewed set of three Policy Development Panels and 11 new Transition Committees which will be set up in each of the new Council areas. All the work will be underpinned with a communications strategy and programme management arrangements.

2.10 Timescale for Implementation

2.10.1 The Minister's aim is to implement the agreed structural reform package by 2011, in line with the elections to the new Assembly, which is clearly a challenging timescale to meet. There are two main options for this to occur. Firstly, the current Council term might be extended to 2011. This option requires the consent of the Secretary of State and legally it might be difficult to extend the current term for any longer than a year. Secondly, elections might take place in 2010 for less than a four year term which would allow elections to take place for the new Councils in 2011 with a transitional period before the new Councils actually get up and running.

3.0 Next Steps for Belfast City Council

3.1 Members will accept that we are rapidly approaching a critical stage in the RPA process and in defining the future shape and role of Local Government within Northern Ireland. It is critical that the Council is effectively engaged within the ongoing discussions around implementation and is represented on the delivery structures put in place.

3.2 Work will have to be undertaken to build the necessary mechanisms to enable the transfer of functions. Smaller functions will be easier to transfer than bigger functions such as planning and regeneration. Much detailed work will be required to build the capacity of Councils to take on the new functions.

- 3.3 Members will further accept that the circumstance for Belfast is unique in that it will not change significantly in terms of scale and geographical location. There is a great opportunity for Belfast to take a leading role on behalf of the Local Government Sector and start the process of learning through the initiation of pilot (e.g., pathfinder) initiatives in the lead up to and in preparation for 2011.
- 3.4 The Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie MLA, has already stated her eagerness to take forward pilot projects around the transfer of neighbourhood renewal and urban regeneration functions although officers have indicated that this might be difficult to achieve. Consideration should be given to the possible extension of such pilots to take account of the wider community planning agenda and the quality of life issues that affect our city and its people.
- 3.5 It will be important that the Council continue to engage both directly with Ministers and within the delivery structures established to demonstrate its willingness to take forward such pilots and help shape the transitional arrangements on behalf of the Local Government sector.
- 3.6 The Council, at both political and senior officer level, need now to start thinking strategically of how the Council could take full advantage of and engage within the RPA and Local Government Modernisation processes and how the transferring functions will be incorporated within, managed and delivered effectively by the Council. This must be considered within the context of the emerging Corporate Plan and the Council's ambitions of becoming an organisation 'fit to lead and serve'.
- 3.7 Members will note that a detailed scoping paper will be brought to the Council's Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, at its meeting in May, examining the possible implications and key issues emerging from the outworking of RPA recommendations and setting out, for Members consideration, a detailed programme of work necessary to prepare and enable the Council to effectively manage the significant change process ahead.
- 3.8 The council also needs to consider commissioning an implementation report, drawing on best practice from recent local governance reviews in Scotland, Wales and ROI which would then form the basis for detailed political engagement with ministers.

4.0 Resource Implications

Financial and Human Resources

There are no Financial or Human Resource implications contained within this report.

5.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to note the contents of this report and, in particular, that a further detailed report and accompanying RPA scoping paper will be brought to the Committee in May, 2008.

Members are further requested to seek meetings with relevant ministers before the end of June by a cross party delegation led by the chair of SP&R Committee.”

The Committee adopted the recommendations and agreed to the commissioning of a paper on the implementation of the Review of Public Administration to be used as a basis for the meetings with the relevant Ministers.

Consultation on the Future Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland

Arising out of discussion of the previous item, the Chief Executive reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 23rd March, 2007, it had approved a response to the Department of Finance and Personnel’s consultation paper entitled “Guiding Principles for the Location of Public Sector Jobs in Northern Ireland.” He advised the Members that a series of twelve public consultation events were scheduled to be held during April, with the event for Belfast due to be held in the Spires Centre on 28th April. Accordingly, he recommended that the Chairman of the Committee and the Party Group Leaders (or their nominees), together with appropriate Council officers, be authorised to attend.

The Committee adopted the recommendation.

Northern Ireland Local Government Association - Update

The Committee noted the contents of a report which provided details in relation to ongoing discussions with representatives of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association regarding its relationship with the Council and noted that a further report would be submitted to its meeting scheduled to be held on 23rd May.

Northern Ireland Assembly Liaison

The Committee noted the contents of a report providing an update in respect of the work which had been undertaken by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

(The Deputy Chairman, Councillor Hartley, in the Chair.)

Communications Review - Annual Report

(Mr. E. Deeny, Head of Corporate Communications, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee noted a report which provided details in relation to the progress achieved arising from the review of communications for the period April, 2007 – March, 2008 and agreed that an independent assessment of the review be undertaken to ascertain how further efficiency savings could be achieved and to develop proposals for a communication framework to support the delivery of the new Corporate Plan.

Data Network and Internet Service Provision

Arising out of discussion in the previous matter, several Members referred to the unacceptably high number of occasions on which difficulties were being experienced with the Council's data network and internet service provision and requested that a detailed report in the matter be submitted to the next scheduled meeting of the Committee.

The Director of Corporate Services undertook to arrange to have the issue addressed as a matter of urgency.

Strategic Policy and Resources Work Plan

The Committee considered the undernoted report in relation to the Forward Work Plan for the period April till June, 2008:

“Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present a forward work plan for the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for the period April - June 2008.

Relevant Background Information

Appendix One provides a detailed work plan for the committee for the period April – June 2008. The key issues section below summarises the key areas of committee activity over this period.

Key Issues

The key work areas for the committee are outlined below. It is recognised that this represents a heavy workload for the committee but at the end of this period the following key outcomes will have been achieved:

- **An agreed corporate plan.**
- **An agreed capital programme.**
- **An agreed process for the development of the city investment strategy.**
- **An agreed asset management strategy.**
- **An agreed strategic finance framework.**

- An agreed strategic human resources management framework.
- An agreed code of governance and associated assurance framework.
- An agreed efficiency and value for money programme for 2009/10.
- An agreed performance management framework
- An agreed communications plan
- An agreed programme of work for RPA.
- An agreed early indicative district rate for 2009/10.

April 2008

RPA – An initial response to the Environment Minister’s statement (31 March 2008) on RPA.

NILGA – Report on the Council’s relationship with NILGA.

Human Resources Strategy Framework – the Chief Executive has started to provide Members with an outline framework for each of the key elements of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee’s work. This month the Acting Head of Human Resources will present on the Human Resources Strategy framework.

Financial Planning Cycle – The committee agreed in March to receive a report on a revised financial planning cycle for the Council in April. This report will outline a revised cycle with a more detailed report being provided in May.

May 2008

RPA – a detailed report will be brought to committee which will examine the possible implications and key issues emerging from the outworking of the RPA recommendations. Members will be provided with a detailed programme of work which will enable the Council to effectively manage the change process which lies ahead.

Corporate Governance/Assurance Framework – this report will recommend a code of governance for the Council along with an overall assurance framework which will allow Members to satisfy themselves that the code is being complied with.

Financial Planning Cycle – detailed reported on a revised financial planning cycle which links to corporate and business planning in order to ensure Council priorities are properly resourced.

Titanic Signature Project – Special meeting to discuss the economic appraisal prepared by Deloitte.

Rates – Members have agreed to hold a special meeting on the issue of rates with the Chief Executive of Land and Property Services in attendance. At this meeting Members will be provided with a reference guide to the rating system and how it impacts on the Council.

June 2008

Special Meeting to agree Corporate Plan – Members will be asked to agree the new corporate plan.

Efficiency Programme – Members will be requested to agree a draft efficiency programme for the financial year 2009/10.

Finance - the Director of Corporate Services will present to committee on the Council's financial performance for 2007/08, notify them of the rates finalisation for 2007/08. He will also start the financial planning for 2009/10 with a discussion on an early indication of an acceptable district rate level.

Asset Management Strategy – the Director of Improvement will present for agreement an Asset Management Strategy which outlines how the Council's assets can be used to support the delivery of the corporate plan. He will also provide detailed reports on Harvester House and the City Hall.

Capital Programme – Members will be asked to agree the Capital Programme.

City Investment Strategy – the Chief Executive will present a report which will ask for agreement on the process for the identification and prioritisation of projects.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to agree:

1. The forward work plan for April – June 2008 outlined in appendix one.

Appendix One

April 2008

RPA – Response to initial announcement

NILGA – Report on the Council's relationship with NILGA.

Northern Ireland Assembly liaison report

Update on Communications Review

Corporate Plan Update

Financial Planning Cycle

Audit Panel Minutes

Human Resources Strategic Framework

Tall Buildings Policy

Gasworks Site

May 2008

RPA – detailed programme of work

Code of Governance and Assurance Framework

Absence Figures 2007/08

Community Outreach and Long Term Unemployed Scheme

Financial Planning Cycle

Special Meeting on Titanic Signature Project

Special Meeting on Rates

June

Special Meeting to Agree Corporate Plan

Capital Programme

City Investment Strategy

Efficiency Programme 2009/10

Finance

- **Report on 2007/08 financial performance**
- **Rates finalisation 2007/08**
- **Indicative Rate 2009/10**

Asset Management Strategy

City Hall Refurbishment

Harvester House”

The Committee approved the foregoing Work Plan.

Corporate Plan and Performance Management

Strategy 2008-2011: Update on Progress

The Committee was reminded that the development of the Corporate Plan 2008-2011 was ongoing and that the five strategic themes which had been identified by the Members for the new Plan were as follows:

- strong leadership;
- economic growth and wealth creation;
- community cohesion and well-being;
- environmental sensitivity and sustainability; and
- an organisation fit to lead and serve.

In line with a request by Elected Members to see enhanced corporate and cross-Departmental working, these issues were being taken forward by five thematic teams comprising of senior officers from across all the Council's Departments.

The Director of Improvement reminded the Committee that the Council's Value Creation Map provided the template for planning in the organisation and the aforementioned teams had been working to develop each of the strategic themes in line with the template. This meant that, in effect, Members would have a complete overview of the proposed plans for the next three years against which affordability limits and performance standards could be agreed and accountability allocated. The Members had already agreed to be briefed on the proposed content of the themes and the dates of the briefings, which would be facilitated by Mr. Jon Huish, would be held between 21st and 23rd, May.

The effective implementation of the Corporate Plan would be dependent upon the productive strategic management of resources in the organisation, including staff finance and other assets. Reports on the strategic human resources framework and the financial planning cycle would be considered by the Committee later in the meeting. In addition, the means by which these documents would assist the Council to achieve its objectives would form part of a proposed corporate plan workshop to be held in June.

The Party Group briefings in relation to the Capital Programme were underway currently. A comprehensive report integrating recommendations with respect to the city investment strategy, the capital programme and the development of an asset management strategy would be submitted to the Committee for consideration in June. Accordingly, by the summer break, the Members would have a complete set of documents comprising the Corporate Plan, which would set out the actions for 2008-2011, the Financial Plan to support those actions and a City Investment Strategy. Performance management would be based on these plans, with on-going, active, political direction being sought as necessary and the plans tested against every day realities.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed that a special meeting of the Committee, to which all Members of the Council would be invited, be held in June to consider the draft Corporate Plan 2008-2011.

Financial Planning Cycle - Update

The Director of Corporate Services advised the Members that the Council's financial plans were a monetary expression of what it wanted to deliver and, therefore, needed to reflect the Council's key priorities and objectives. The best organisations ensured that their business and financial planning were very closely aligned and integrated and, accordingly, a key action for the Council this year was to further align and integrate financial and business planning.

He reported that officers were working currently to develop the financial planning cycle, details of which would be submitted to the Committee at its meeting scheduled to be held on 23rd May. However, the work which had been completed to date had highlighted an issue which required to be brought to the attention of the Members before that meeting. He explained that, in previous years, the financial planning cycle had commenced in September, with the Director of Corporate Services issuing budget guidance to Departments. However, for the new Corporate Plan the Council would have to find ways of financing new priorities and still deliver core services. This would be a significant challenge since the Council would be required to undertake more services whilst utilising the same amount of money. It was likely, therefore, that many conflicts would arise regarding the allocation of resources and these could take a significant period of time to resolve. In order to allow sufficient time to identify the budget needs of both the core services and the new priorities and to develop options for resolving conflicts between them, he recommended that the financial planning cycle should commence in June, 2008.

The Director indicated that this would require the Members to provide in June an indication of what their ambition for the District Rate would be for 2009/10. Accordingly, in order to facilitate this, he would provide the Committee with the rates finalisation figures for 2007/08 and an analysis of the Council's financial performance for the same period. The Members would be provided with more details in this regard at the Corporate Plan briefings which were scheduled to be held during May.

The Committee noted that a detailed report on the integrated financial and business planning would be submitted for consideration at the meeting scheduled to be held on 23rd May and agreed that the Council's financial planning cycle commence in June, 2008.

Strategic Human Resources Management Framework

The Committee considered the undernoted report in relation to the Strategic Human Resources Management Framework:

"Relevant Background Information

Strategic human resource (HR) management is central to the council's improvement agenda because:

- **The people who work for the council are at the heart of delivering high quality services to Belfast's citizens, visitors and stakeholders.**

- Sustaining and developing our capacity to secure the success of the council to meet the challenges ahead depends on the quality, motivation and commitment of our staff to make our ambitions a reality. We need the right number of people with the right skills in the right place at the right time.
- Over the next few years, especially because of RPA, it is likely that the council's workforce will change in size and nature. Clearer alignment of the planning and development of our workforce with corporate strategic, financial asset and business planning will better optimise our workforce capacity and people management practices.

Like strategic financial planning, strategic HR management is an essential element of good corporate governance; it forms part of the foundations of the organisation, underpinning the delivery of agreed priorities; and provides the basis of accountability to members and the citizens of Belfast for the stewardship and use of resources.

The improvement agenda update report discussed by committee last month included some of the key improvement actions undertaken during 2007/08 in relation to strategic HR management.

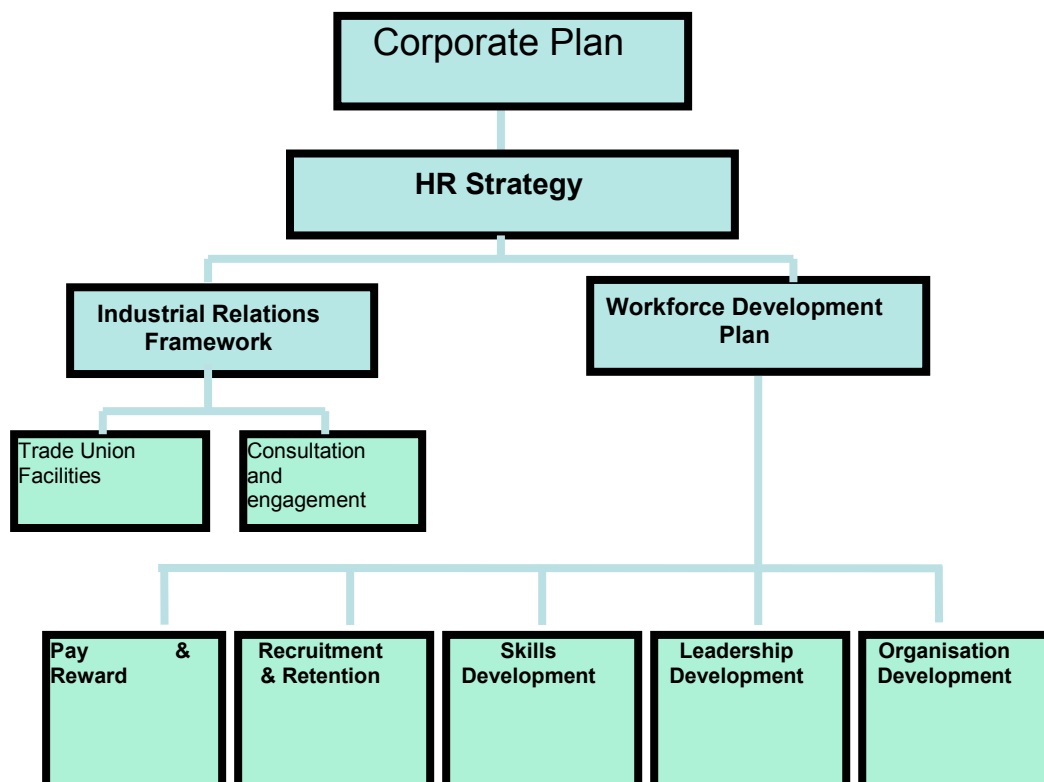
The purpose of this report is:

- To outline for members the overall strategic HR management framework of the organisation
- To agree HR reports for the committee for May and June 2008/09.

Key Issues

The strategic HR framework of the council is set out below.

Figure 1 **Strategic HR Management Framework**



The key outputs of the HR planning processes in the council are the HR strategy and Workforce Development Plan. These plans set out what we will do to support the delivery of members' key priorities and objectives.

HR Strategy

The overall purpose of the HR Strategy is to ensure that the HR function underpins both the day to day activities of the council and the achievement of its medium to longer term objectives in meeting members' vision and ambition for the future.

Key HR goals relate to achieving enhanced performance in areas such as leadership of place, customer focus, performance management etc. They were identified through an analysis of members' emerging priorities; relevant external factors; the council's value creation map (VCM); and the internal factors that will enable or hinder the achievement of the Corporate Plan.

Workforce Development Plan

The Workforce Development Plan is essentially the delivery mechanism for the HR strategy and sets out how the council will recruit, support, develop and retain employees to support its corporate strategy; it focuses on improving current and developing new processes around the key themes of:

1. Pay and reward
2. Recruitment and retention
3. Skills Development
4. Leadership Development
5. Organisation Development

Progress on the main actions under these themes is under way. For example:

- Attendance and capability policies have been agreed and a robust performance management approach to attendance implemented.
- A review of our Occupational Health service is under way to ensure it is fit for the purpose of supporting a strong culture of attendance in Belfast City Council
- Effective processes for the staffing elements of the Scheme of Delegation are currently being reviewed
- Chief officers, heads of service/senior management appraisal scheme is being fundamentally revised.
- Timely and accurate management information is being developed to support effective people management.
- 'Satisfactory service' has been defined for use in relation to incremental progression through our new pay and grading system.
- The recruitment aspects of the advertising review are being implemented.
- More effective community outreach measures are being developed.

Many of the approaches outlined in the HR strategy and Workforce Development Plan require the ability to specify clearly what skills and behaviours are required e.g. to underpin the culture, or when writing job descriptions, assessing performance and identifying development needs. The development of a competency framework for the council is therefore a key strategic initiative. It will identify clearly the competencies, skills and behaviours required to deliver members' priorities and corporate objectives. This will enable us to translate the various organisational requirements into what individuals need to be able to do. This will in turn help us to be specific about what we want from people we recruit, develop and promote.

More information on the HR strategy and Workforce Development Plan and their associated key actions will be brought to committee in June. Some examples of key actions are summarised in appendix one.

It is important to note that these actions are in addition to those required for continuing delivery of existing 'status quo' services.

Industrial Relations Framework

Members are aware that the council's industrial relations are critical. They can be a potential block to progress, but also an enabler of change. Consequently we are monitoring and reviewing our industrial relations framework to ensure we have effective mechanisms for TU and staff consultation, negotiation, and policy-making that are linked to corporate, HR and business planning.

Delivery

Finally, in relation to the delivery of the HR strategy, Workforce Development Plan, and the industrial relations framework we have an operational HR service that is trying to move to one that also supports strategic human resource management and the management of change and organisational development (OD) in the council. The review of the centre of the organisation may therefore need to prioritise the review of the HR function to ensure we can effectively do this.

Proposed HR reports to Committee May and June 2008

May

- Year-end absence analysis and agree future targets
- Report on the council's Community Outreach programme
- June
- Report on HR Strategy and Workforce Development Plan key actions.

Recommendations

Members are requested to note the contents of the report and agree HR reports for May and June 2008 as outlined above."

The Committee adopted the recommendation.

Democratic Services and Governance

Requests for the Provision of Hospitality

The Committee was advised that the undernoted requests for the provision of hospitality had been received:

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
Greenwood Primary School	50th Anniversary Dinner 17th May 2008 (evening) Approximately 150 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a pre-dinner drinks reception	This event seeks to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Greenwood Primary School and to acknowledge the contribution of the school to the general life and well-being of the city.	Provision of a pre-dinner drinks reception Approximate cost £600 Approximate budget remaining £199,400
City of Belfast School of Music	Annual Students' Recital and Presentation of Awards 13th June, 2008 (evening) Approximately 200 Attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception and canapes	The Council has a close working relationship with the School of Music which provides entertainment at many of the Civic Functions. This event meets the Council's Corporate Strategic Objective of Providing Civic Leadership and would contribute to its Key Priority Issue of Improving Service Provision to Children and Young People.	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception and canapes Approximate cost £2,000 Approximate budget remaining £197,400
Northern Ireland Centre of Excellence in Public Health Research	Excellence in Public Health Research Conference 18th June 2008 (evening) Approximately 80 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 30 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £320 Approximate budget remaining £197,080
Queen's University Belfast	The 3rd European Conference on Apidology 8th September, 2008 (evening) Approximately 300 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 300 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £1,200 Approximate budget remaining £195,880

Organisation/ Body	Event/Date – Number of Delegates/Guests	Request	Comments	Recommendation
International Map Trade Association	International Map Trade Association Trade Show 19th February 2009 (evening) Approximately 150 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 150 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £600 Approximate budget remaining £195,280
British Association of Critical Care Nurses	British Association of Critical Care Nurses 24th Annual Conference 14th September 2009 (evening) Approximately 500 attending	Provision of hospitality in the form of a drinks reception	It is estimated that 500 delegates will be staying in accommodation in Belfast and the conference will take place within the city.	Provision of a drinks reception Approximate cost £2,000 Approximate budget remaining £193,280

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

Leadership in a Political Environment Conference

The Committee was advised that SOLACE (United Kingdom) was organising in London on 11th June a conference which would explore the issues of providing leadership within a political environment and aligning public service management to the world of politics. One of the key themes which had been identified to prepare for the post-Review of Public Administration environment was improving the capacity of both Members and senior managers. Accordingly, it would be advantageous for the Council to be represented at the conference by both Members and officers. In addition, improving gender quality through capacity building was another issue which could be addressed through the Council's involvement in the conference. This could be achieved by requesting the Council's Member/officer Women's Steering Group to nominate one Member and one officer as part of the delegation.

After discussion, the Committee agreed, given the value which the conference would provide to the commitment by the Council to develop the capacity of Members and officers, to authorise the attendance at the conference of the Chairman (Councillor D. Dodds), the Party Group Leaders and the Chief Executive (or their nominees), together with a Member and an officer representative of the Council's Women's Steering Group and approved the payment of the conference fees and the travel and subsistence allowances in connection therewith.

Finance

Minutes of Audit Panel

The minutes of the meeting of the Audit Panel held on 2nd April were approved and adopted.

Annual Governance Statement 2007/08

The Committee was advised that one of the key implications of the Local Government (Accounts and Audit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 was a requirement for the Council to prepare an Annual Governance Statement which would form part of the annual accounts. The Director of Corporate Services explained that the Department of the Environment's guidance to the regulations made it clear that either the Chair of the Local Government Body or a Committee of the Body could sign the statement of accounts. In the case of the Council, this would be either the Lord Mayor or the Chairman of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee.

Accordingly, given that financial matters were the responsibility of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, he recommended that the Chairman of the Committee be authorised to act as the signatory to the Annual Statement of Accounts, which would include the Annual Governance Statement.

The Committee adopted the recommendation.

Titanic Signature Project

The Committee noted a report which provided an update in relation to the Titanic Signature Project and agreed that a special meeting, to which all Members of the Council would be invited, be held during May in order to discuss the findings of the due diligence exercise which was being undertaken currently by consultants on behalf of the Council.

Human Resources

Standing Order 55 - Employment of Relatives

It was reported that, in accordance with Standing Order 55 and the authority delegated to him, the Director of Corporate Services had authorised the appointment of a number of Members of staff who were related to existing officers of the Council.

The Committee noted the appointments.

Asset Management

Lands at Hannahstown Hill

The Director of Legal Services advised the Members that the Council was the owner of 6.5 acres of lands at Hannahstown Hill which were the subject of a judicial review application by a former owner. Following a failed attempt to vest the lands, the then owner had entered into an agreement for the sale of the lands to the Council in 1994. The land had not been used for the purpose for which it had been acquired originally and on 30th June, 2004 had been re-appropriated to be held for the improvement, development or future development of the Council's district. The former owner had contended that, under certain legal provisions applying to the acquisition and disposal of land, the site at Hannahstown was and had been surplus and that, as such, the Council was under an obligation to offer it back to him given that it had been acquired under threat of a vesting order.

The Director of Legal Services explained that legal advice had been sought from Senior Counsel and, in light of that advice, he was of the opinion that the Council should agree to settlement terms on the basis that these were reasonable in all circumstances and gave due protection to the Council's legal and commercial interests.

After discussion, the Committee agreed to accept the recommendation of the Director of Legal Services to enter into suitable terms of settlement for the lands at Hannahstown Hill.

Growing the Rates Base - Future Importance of Tall Buildings in Belfast

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“Relevant Background Information

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to gain agreement from Members to request meetings between the Environment Minister (Arlene Foster), the Social Development Minister (Margaret Ritchie) and the Finance Minister (Peter Robinson) and a cross party delegation from the Council to lobby the case for tall buildings in Belfast to help achieve the Council's aim of growing the city's rates base and to act as a catalyst for further city investment.

Background

There are a number of proposals for mixed use (commercial/residential) tall buildings in and around the centre of Belfast. The developers involved are becoming increasingly frustrated that the major infrastructure opportunity for Belfast is not getting sufficient support from the Planning Service and a number of them have approached the Council for assistance.

The key argument for Council assistance is that developers increasingly see the Council as the custodian of the city's well-being. They cite the Council's position in regard to –

- welcoming investment particularly in the light of the forthcoming US conference and our own City Investment Strategy;
- our arguments about increasing the city's population;
- our ambition to be a leading European city with cutting edge architecture
- the need to consolidate the city centre as Titanic Quarter grows and creates displacement i.e. the proposed Belfast Metropolitan College and the associated reduction of student spend in the city
- the stated need for gateway projects in the Council's Masterplan e.g. Shaftesbury Square/Great Victoria Street

There are many aesthetic pros and cons for tall buildings but it is generally agreed that they work best in clusters.

Officers have explained that the Council cannot be expected to lobby Ministers on individual proposals but that the Committee might consider making a broader argument in regard to the overall impact on city investment and the city rate base.

Current position

Cities and their skylines evolve. The great cities of the world have internationally recognisable tall buildings which dominate their skylines and are instant landmarks – e.g. Tower 42 and Canary Wharf in London, the Empire State Building and the Chrysler Building in New York, the Sears Tower in Chicago, the Burj Al Arab Hotel in Dubai and the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur.

As Members are aware land is a scarce resource, particularly in city centres. This necessitates greater density of development which often leads to the building of tall buildings. In cities across the world there is a growing trend towards multi-use tall buildings which house residential, office, commercial, shopping and even educational facilities under one roof. Tall buildings are seeing an unprecedented resurgence in the UK and across the world with 40% of the world's tallest buildings having been completed since 2000¹.

The issue of tall buildings often sparks much heated debate with advocates both for and against them. There is much research to evidence that in the right place, tall buildings can make positive contributions to city life. They can be excellent works of architecture in their own right. Individually, or when built in clusters, they affect the image and identity of a city as a whole. In the right place they can serve as beacons of regeneration and stimulate further investment. The positive effect that a tall building can have on perceptions can extend to entire cities e.g. the recently completed 48 floor mixed use Beetham Tower in Manchester has promoted the city's image as a modern and dynamic place and attracted huge media interest. The Gherkin in London has shown how a top class, quality designed building can capture the public imagination and instantly become a symbol of a city.

However it is important that to note that tall buildings must be of a high quality design, be sustainable, environmentally friendly and socially responsible. For many people tall buildings are synonymous with the badly designed, cheaply built, badly maintained buildings which sprung up during the 60s which failed to meet the needs of their users and did little for their local environment.

¹ The Economist June 2006

Key Issues

This is a time of great and exciting change for Belfast. Projects such as the new openly £400million Victoria Square and the regeneration of major sites such as Titanic will continue to change and transform the skyline. However it has been commented that Belfast is a city of bungalows. There are only a handful of buildings which could currently be considered as 'tall' including Windsor House in Bedford Street and the City Hospital. However these are older buildings and none could be considered buildings of high architectural merit.

In order to cement Belfast's unique position and to allow it to flourish as a global city there is a need to look at the issue of tall buildings and how this can be progressed to best meet the needs of the city.

Policy Framework – Tall Buildings

As Members are aware there are currently a number of tall buildings which have received full planning permission in Belfast although work has yet to commence on some of these e.g. the Obel development off Custom House Square and Bedford Square. A number of others are currently in the planning application stage including the iconic £90million/37 floor Aurora Building at Great Victoria Street. There are also a wide number of other tall buildings developments which are currently at the concept stage only across the city including the redevelopment of Windsor House in Bedford Street (which if redeveloped would be Ireland's tallest building) and the current site of Park House in Great Victoria Street. The significance of these developments is underlined by the fact that these three developments alone (Aurora/Park House/Windsor House) have a combined gross development value of more than Victoria Square.

As evidenced above there has been an increasing number of applications for tall buildings in Belfast over the past decade and it is likely that this will continue to increase as the city's reputation grows. However an emerging issue which is coming increasingly to the fore is that there is no overall policy framework for tall buildings in Northern Ireland. Decisions by the Planning Service on tall buildings in Belfast are taken on an individual basis as they come in with little acknowledgement given to the wider picture of how all the developments could work together or become clusters which will help stimulate further regeneration, growth and investment. There is also a tendency for risk adversity when it comes to these types of decisions due to the lack of direction in relation to assessing proposals.

In contrast in England and Wales guidance is available on tall buildings which helps local planning authorities to evaluate planning applications for tall buildings and also offers good practice in relation to tall buildings. The policy guidance in England and Wales advises local planning authorities to identify locations for tall building in their development plans. Many English councils have separate tall buildings policies.

There is clearly a need for a 'tall building' framework to be developed. As Members are aware the Planning Service is currently undergoing a period of review and reform and it is timely to bring this issue up for debate.

Population density and growing the city's rates base

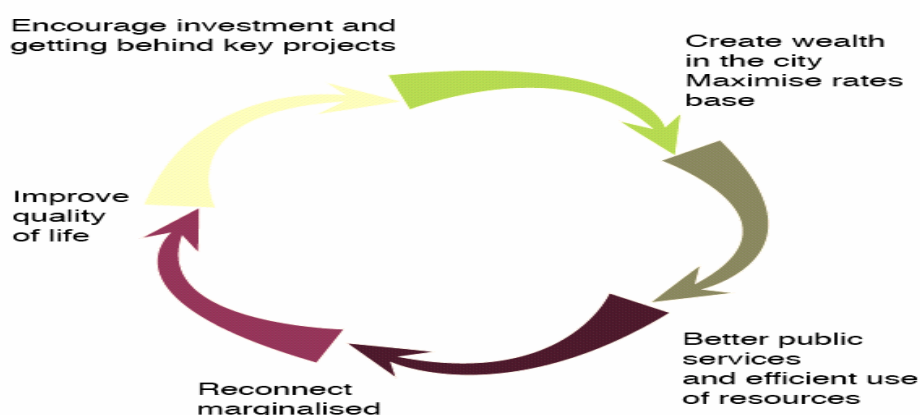
As Members are aware, Belfast's population is predicted to continue to decline over the next 20 years. It has already been acknowledged that this will have a detrimental effect on the city's rates base and the Council has already identified this as a strategic issue. Looking at ways to increase the population, particularly of trying to bring people back into the city centre, is one way to reverse this decline. Growing the city's population is also key to improved competitiveness as evidenced in Michael Parkinson's research and Belfast City Council has already outlined its aim to increase the city centre population by 100,000.

Across the UK there is a growing trend for 'apartment living' in city centres. City centre living offers many advantages – close proximity to shops and associated services and it also makes the best use of existing city centre infrastructure with good transport links. Maximising the development of existing brownfield sites in the city also helps to protect open space.

Building tall is not the only way to increase population density in cities but it is clear that tall buildings, particularly apartment blocks or mixed use developments, are a key way of helping to bring people back into the city centre and so helping to provide the intensification of activity and densification of people that help make cities thrive. For many years Belfast city centre was not regarded as a safe place to live however this is now starting to change with releases for high quality apartment blocks in the city centre selling out quickly e.g. the apartments at Victoria Square sold out at a time when there the housing market had taken a downturn and the apartments that were released at the Obel development at Custom House Square sold out within 48 hours of release.

The diagram below shows how encouraging investment and getting behind key projects can help to grow and maximise the rates base in the city which in turn allows us to deliver better services and reconnect the marginalised. This is a key argument for the need for mixed use type of tall buildings in the city centre.

Growing investment and meeting need The virtuous circle



Gateways sites – Regeneration

As highlighted tall buildings as flagship projects can also act as major catalysts for regeneration in areas. Tall buildings do not necessarily have to be in the core city centre to be successful. There are numerous examples of successful tall buildings which are on gateway sites around city centres – the very successful Beetham Tower in Manchester which is highlighted above was built outside the traditional core of the city centre. Developments on gateway sites can also benefit from having good public transport links.

Another strong example of a tall building which was on a gateway site and which acted as a major regeneration catalyst is One Canada Square, the main tower at Canary Wharf, which is still the tallest building in the UK. Despite having to contend with a recession shortly after construction, it sparked the transformation of the Isle of Dogs in London. The area is now a major financial, commercial, residential and leisure centre. While the office space contained in One Canada Square could have been provided in a lower building occupying a greater floor area, as a tall building it worked as a beacon, boldly signalling that the area was enjoying major investment and in turn helping to attract further investment in to the area.

The proposed cluster of tall buildings in the Great Victoria Square area of Belfast mentioned above could help to significantly regenerate this area and act as a catalyst for further regeneration.

Planning Gain – Tall buildings

An excellent tall building should positively enhance its locality and share the benefits of the investment throughout the local area including improvements to the public realm and helping to secure additional public space. This can help contribute to the safety, diversity, sense of place and social engagement of an area. In England these additional improvements are often secured through the use of planning obligations.

The legislative basis for planning obligations is Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Planning obligations are defined as ‘the principle of a planning applicant agreeing to provide additional benefits or safeguards, often for the benefit of the community, usually in the form of related developments’. Their purpose is to mitigate the impact of a proposed new development. S106 agreements can be undertaken in numerous ways – to prescribe the nature of development (e.g. by requiring that a given proportion of housing is affordable); or to secure a contribution from a developer to compensate for loss or damage (e.g. loss of open space); or to mitigate a development’s impact (e.g. through increased public transport provision).

The experience from England and Wales would suggest that Section 106 arrangements – although complex and time-consuming to put into place, deliver real tangible outcomes. According to research carried out recently by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, planning agreements are now attached to 40% of major residential planning permissions in England compared to 26% in 1998. In 2003/04 the value of obligations agreed was estimated to be approximately £1.9bn.

There are no specific planning obligation provisions in place in Northern Ireland. However, Article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 provides similar powers to Section 106. Article 40 is however much narrower and more one dimensional than Section 106 and can only be applied to the development in question. To date Article 40 agreements have been quite restrictively applied in Northern Ireland and the only real uses of it in Belfast have been with regards to transport related issues.

It is apparent that local authorities in Northern Ireland are missing a significant opportunity that is afforded to councils in GB due to the differences in the legal basis for planning obligations and that as a Council we are missing out on a potentially invaluable source of funding which could be used to significantly improve infrastructure.

The Council has a very robust position on the need for planning gain in Northern Ireland which has been consistently highlighted both in consultation responses (BMAP, the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan etc.) and in discussions with the Planning Service and other Government Departments.

It is timely to consider this issue now given the ongoing review of the Planning Service in Northern Ireland and the outcome of the Review of Public Administration which will mean that from 2011 local government will have responsibility for aspects of planning.

Next Steps

Tall buildings need to be considered for the positive qualities they can bring to Belfast. Belfast City Council is ambitious for the city which has been demonstrated by the commitment to creating a legacy for tomorrow 'Today's Actions, Tomorrow's Legacy'. Tall buildings will help to cement Belfast's growing reputation as a city on the rise and will help generate confidence in its future - socially, economically and aesthetically. As Belfast currently has a limited number of tall buildings this also gives the city a unique opportunity to learn from the mistakes of other cities and to ensure that any high rise building are of the highest quality and use innovative design.

In order to move this debate forward and to ensure that Belfast will have some truly iconic for the new century it is recommended that the Council requests a meeting with the Environment Minister, the Social Development Minister and the Finance Minister to lobby the strong case for tall buildings in Belfast based on the arguments highlighted above.

Recommendations

The Strategic Policy & Resources Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and –

- Agree to request meetings between the Environment Minister (Arlene Foster), Social Development Minister (Margaret Ritchie) and the Finance Minister (Peter Robinson) and a cross party delegation from the Council, led by the Chairs of the Strategic Policy and Resources and Development Committees, to lobby the case for tall buildings in Belfast as a mechanism to help grow the city's rate base and act as a catalyst for further city investment and to explore with Ministers the potential for planning gain to act as a mechanism to lever further resources into the provision of public infrastructure."

The Committee adopted the recommendation, subject to the development of a position paper which would take into account issues such as location, quality of building and type of use.

Gasworks Estate

The Committee considered the undernoted report in relation to the Gasworks Estate:

“Relevant Background Information

(a) additional floor for Ormeau Gasworks Ltd Plot 4

Members are reminded that Council entered into a Master Development Agreement with Ormeau Gasworks Ltd dated 21st May 1999 for development of six plots with the Gasworks Estate.

At its meeting on 15th June 2005 the Development Committee approved an initial revision of the specified floor space in respect of Plot 4 to construct an office building with a total floor area of approximately 25,500 sq feet over four floors.

Upon completion of the building Council granted Ormeau Gasworks Ltd a 250 year Lease from 6th April 2006 who immediately in turn effectively sold the completed development to Tullyraine Ltd. This sale reserved a reviewable ground rent payable to Council which reflects the lettable floor space of the building. Currently Council receive an annual rent of £26,000 per annum.

It is believed that Tullyraine Ltd have agreed terms with DFP (Industrial Tribunals Office - ITO) for a 15 year term for the entire building as it stands. DFP have requested the provision of additional space, through the addition of a further floor, in order to fully meet the operational needs of the ITO.

Ormeau Gasworks Ltd submitted a planning application for construction of an additional and fifth floor on Plot 4 and formally sought Council's consent for this variation to the originally approved development. The addition of a fifth floor will add a further 5,670 sq feet of office space to Plot 4.

(b) road safety measures

At its meeting of 15th June 2005 the Development Committee were advised that a report had been commissioned from Kirk McClure & Morton (now RPS Consulting Engineers) to assess disabled access within the Estate and examine the need for additional road safety measures resulting from increased volume of pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

Some recommendations have already been addressed such as a right turn filter on the traffic signals from Ormeau Avenue (Roads Service), an additional exit lane and pedestrian crossing at the main entrance of the Estate (£3,700) In addition the developer of the Klondyke Building provided an enhanced turning head at his cost under instruction from the Estate Management Unit.

In order to complete the DDA compliance work identified within the RPS Report it has been agreed that Ormeau Gasworks Ltd carry out installation of the 'wheelchair friendly' access on Council land as part of their contract to provide the required access road on adjacent land at Plot 3.

Key Issues

(a) additional floor for Ormeau Gasworks Ltd Plot 4

- Clause 5.5.1.2 of the Superior Lease contains an outright prohibition against any alterations to the premises without prior consent from the Council. A premium of £30,000 has been agreed for a specific variation of the Clause.
- Planning permission has now been secured for the addition of a further floor providing approximately 5,670 sq feet of additional office accommodation. In addition to the statutory neighbourhood notification Council officers have also canvassed opinion from Inislyn Ltd whose hotel development (Radisson SAS) will be affected – they had no particular objections.
- Consarc, Council's consultant architects, reviewed an additional fifth floor on Plot 4 and confirmed broad support for the proposals having considered the effect on the Estate in terms of its architectural merit.
- Parks have confirmed no objection to the increased height given the proximity of a taller building and its effect on natural light to the existing areas of adjoining landscaping.
- This building has remained vacant since its completion in April 2006. Consent to the additional floor will progress upgrading and completion of the occupational fit-out and finish outstanding exterior works including a new entrance porch, automatic vehicular access barrier, completion of external lighting, surfacing and landscaping schemes.
- Permission had previously granted approval to the location of an NIE sub-station on Plot 4 which still requires construction of a suitable structure that will provide appropriate screening. Ormeau Gasworks Ltd have yet to complete the scheme, for which approval has been given, that provides a suitable screening solution. Council consent to construct additional floor onto the existing building would require the NIE sub-station to be screened.

(b) road safety measures

- The work required to provide a 'wheelchair friendly' route is needed to comply with DDA requirements. The opportunity exists to have this work undertaken by Ormeau Gasworks Ltd who has an obligation to provide a quality shared access route linking the main pedestrian access to the rest of the Estate.
- Ormeau Gasworks Ltd have negotiated a price with Marmic (used recently by Council for upgrading the City centre entries) Disability Action has also been engaged by the Developer to endorse the scheme design.
- Council's Landscape Planning and Development Unit, who were responsible for design of the Gasworks public realm, have approved the design of both schemes using high quality natural Caithness stone finishes.
- PMU have confirmed Marmic as an appropriate contractor to undertake this nature of work and that the following negotiated prices represent value for money (all of the project fees are being absorbed by the Developer)

Total Contract	£170,768
Council Works	£25,597 (approx 15%)
- Included within the above cost is the repair of broken and damaged sandstone on Limetree Walk will also be replaced with more durable Caithness stone specifically designed to meet the recent DDA recommendations.
- Based on report from PMU this appointment has been endorsed by Council's Procurement Unit.

Resource Implications

Financial

- Ormeau Gasworks Ltd have agreed to payment of a premium of £30,000 to vary the terms of their Lease and secure the required Council consent.
- Council will take the benefit of an uplift in the annual equity rent from Plot 4 attributable to the increased floor area. This is estimated at approximately £7,000 per annum additional income.
- The cost associated with the road safety and DDA works will be funded from the Gasworks Estate rental income with some elements such as the pedestrian crossing recharged to the Estate's tenants through the annual service charge.

Asset and Other Implications

- Approval of an additional floor for Plot 4 could lead to other requests from Developers in the Gasworks to intensify development of other already completed plots.
- In addition to the payment of a premium Council's consent is conditional upon completion of the approved screening of the NIE sub-station as part of the contract to construct the additional floor.
- Compliance with DDA recommendations for the Estate.

Recommendations

(a) additional floor for Ormeau Gasworks Ltd Plot 4

Members are asked to approve the addition of a further and fifth floor to the existing development on Plot 4 subject to payment of a premium of £30,000 and further terms and conditions to be agreed by the Estates Management Unit.

(b) road safety measures

Members are requested to note the works undertaken to date and to approve the initiation of works to provide DDA improvements to the existing road/footpath infrastructure in the Gasworks Estate as detailed above including endorsement of the tender process identified for the completion of these works.

Key to Abbreviations

DFP – Department of Finance and Personnel
ITO – Industrial Tribunals Office
NIE – Northern Ireland Electricity
DDA – Disability Discrimination Act
PMU – Project Management Unit”

The Committee adopted the recommendations.

Capital Programme: Blythefield Open Space – Changing Accommodation and Multi-Use Games Area

The Director of Improvement reported that, whilst the Council's Capital Programme had not as yet been endorsed politically, there were a number of Capital projects which were required to be advanced urgently. One such proposal was the construction of the changing accommodation and a multi-use games area at the Blythefield Open Space, a project which had been initiated in 2005 by the former Community and Recreation (Parks and Cemeteries) Sub-Committee.

The Director explained that, in November, 2006, that Sub-Committee had granted authority to proceed with the project, subject to the cost being funded 100% by the Belfast Regeneration Office. The design had since been developed and tender documentation had been prepared as part of the application for grant funding which was being considered currently by the Belfast Regeneration Office. The proposal was urgent in so far as the work had been programmed to commence in the early summer, subject to a positive outcome on the funding application and, accordingly, the funding might be lost if the project were not in a position to be implemented on schedule.

The Committee approved the commencement of a tendering exercise for the construction of the changing accommodation and a multi-use games area at the Blythefield Open Space site.

City Hall Grounds Tours - Pilot Implementation

The Committee deferred consideration of a report in relation to the City Hall grounds tours pilot scheme to enable further information to be provided in relation to the appropriateness of the proposal - including the imposition of charges - whether such a scheme could be suitably managed and indeed its whole viability, the proposed script, staffing issues and the impact on private tour operators.

Good Relations and Equality

Minutes of Meeting of Good Relations Steering Panel

The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting of the Good Relations Steering Panel held on 4th April.

Cross-Cutting Issues

Post Office Consultation

The Committee was advised that the Post Office Limited was undertaking a consultation exercise on its Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal Northern Ireland. The programme was designed to implement measures proposed by the Government to modernise and reshape the network of Post Office branches. The Director of Improvement outlined the minimum access criteria, the rationale for change and types of outreach services which had been suggested. He explained that, out of the 54 current Post Office branches to be replaced by Outreach services, none were located within the Belfast City Council area. With regard to closures, 10 out of the 42 branches proposed for closure were located within the Council area. These were:

- Belmont, 1 Campbell Park Avenue, Belfast BT4 3FH, Victoria Electoral Area.
- Blacks Road, 120 Blacks Road, Belfast BT10 0NF, Upper Falls Electoral Area.
- Carlisle Circus, 14 Antrim Road, Belfast BT15 2AA, Oldpark Electoral Area.
- Cave Hill, 634 Antrim Road, Belfast BT15 5GP, Castle Electoral Area.

- Grosvenor Street, 263 Grosvenor Road, Belfast BT12 4LL, Lower Falls Electoral Area.
- Lisburn Road, 217 Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 7EJ, Balmoral Electoral Area.
- Orangefield, 276 Castlereagh Road, Belfast BT5 6AD, Pottinger Electoral Area.
- Ormeau Road, 160 Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 2ED, Laganbank Electoral Area.
- Summerhill, 3 Summerhill Avenue, Belfast BT5 7HD, Victoria Electoral Area.
- The Throne, The Throne Centre, Whitewell Road, Belfast BT36 7EX, Castle Electoral Area.

Accordingly, he recommended that the Council submit the following response:

“Re: Post Office Ltd Network Change Programme – Area Plan Proposal Northern Ireland

Thank you for your letter of March 31st regarding the Regional Plan Proposal for Northern Ireland that is part of the Network Change Programme to reshape and modernise the Post Office Network.

With respect to the proposed closures in the Belfast area, the Council is concerned that a number of the closures are in constituencies with a high concentration of areas of deprivation. Care should be taken that closures do not impact adversely on those most in need in our city.

Much of the media focus has been on rural communities and the associated impact of closures; however Belfast City Council would suggest that the Post Office would be mindful of the fact that urban communities are equally affected by access, particularly groups such as the elderly, those with mobility issues and residents in deprived areas. In addition taking into account the divided nature of parts of the city, this can have amplified implications on the socially excluded groups already mentioned.

Belfast City Council acknowledges the economic considerations behind the proposed closures to support and reshape the Network for the future and ensure the Network’s continued viability, however Belfast City Council seeks assurances that residents requirements will continue to be met by the Post Office Network, especially the most vulnerable and socially excluded sections of the community so that these groups are not adversely affected.

The detailed impact assessment undertaken by Post Office Ltd and copies of the analysis of Post Office branches from the Belfast area has been sent to individual party groups on the Council for them to review and respond with comments in line with their local knowledge and familiarity with the needs of local people.

As the Outreach Service will not apply in the Belfast City area however, we feel it would not be appropriate for us to comment on its applicability.

Thank you for keeping Belfast City Council informed of the current position.”

During discussion in the matter the Members made the following comments:

- the response should be amended to indicate that the Council was opposed to the closure of any branches in the Belfast City Council area;
- further consideration should be given to providing Outreach services instead of closing Post Offices;
- consideration should be given to the knock-on effect which closures would have on independent retailers located beside Post Offices in order to maximise their customer base;
- the requirement for 95% the urban population to be within 1 mile of their Post Office branch could mean the difference between the elderly being independent or not; accordingly, branches which fell within the minimum distance should not be closed for that reason alone;
- there was a need to look at how Post Office branches could operate in a sustainable way, that is, through the return of services which had been transferred by the Government to the banks and through the provision of Council services, such as the issuing of dog licenses; and
- whilst it was recognised that it was not part of the criteria used to select Post Offices for closure, consideration should be given to the fact that some of the branches proposed for closure operated in and serviced a cross-community population, which in itself provided a benefit to the immediate locality.

The Committee agreed that the response be amended to incorporate the foregoing comments.

Chairman